

10. **Annual Report Outlining the Past Year's Work of the Countryside, Heritage and Tourism Service August 2007- August 2008**

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Purpose of the Report

To update Area West members on the past and forthcoming year's work of the countryside, tourism and heritage service.

Recommendation

That the report be noted.

Report

Our vision is that the service

- Is user focussed
- Provides award winning facilities and service
- Organises excellent opportunities for public engagement
- Enables others to succeed in countryside, heritage and tourism

The Service's Work Includes

- The strategic and day to day management of country parks, countryside sites, public rights of way, trails and circular walks, Ham Hill Education Centre, the Community Heritage Access Centre (CHAC), the Heritage Visitor Information Centre in Yeovil, Cartgate Tourist Information Centre, Langport Visitor Centre.
- Community engagement through apprenticeships, volunteering opportunities in Heritage and Countryside, work placements, work parties, the Parish Path Stewardship scheme
- Learning and Outreach at Ham Hill Education Centre, with school and college groups, youth offenders, gifted and talented pupils, festivals and events
- Publications and information e.g. tourism publications, email bulletins and websites
- Business liaison and support e.g. accommodation providers, attractions, local information centres, community museums and parish councils.

The Service Approach is

- To be responsive
- To be efficient - sharing resources through collaborative working, both across this service, with other services and with external individuals and organisations
- Building capacity through apprenticeship collaborations, the use of seasonal staff, volunteers and the use of external funding
- Delivery focussed

The Countryside Service

Some highlights from around the District 2007/08

- 2007/08 was another successful year of events, festivals and heritage fayres. The May Fayre 2008 at Yeovil Country Park survived despite 50mm of rainfall and attracted over 500 visitors
- Chard Countryside Day was held in September 2007
- The Rights of Way Service moved from its Chaffcombe Depot home to a newer, more serviceable site at Houndstone Business Park
- Our Tourist Information Centres at Cartgate and Yeovil both secured regional excellence awards
- A "Peoples' Millions" grant of £80k was won by Yeovil Country Park
- Both Yeovil and Ham Hill Country Park retained Green Flag status for a fourth year in 2008
- Ham Hill was voted 'South West Picnic Site of the Year 2008'

The Rights of Way Network

- This has been the third year of the Parish Paths Stewardship Scheme with volunteer training sessions held and newsletters distributed to members of the scheme and parish councils. We now have Rights of Way Parish Liaison Officers representing 81% of Parishes and Towns across the District. This is an improvement on our 2007 figure (72%) The only parishes WITHOUT Liaison Officers in Area West are Ashill, Cudworth, Merriott, Whitelackington, Whitestaunton. The success of the scheme is reflected in the fact that across the District over the last 12 months there were 264 volunteer days devoted to public right of way maintenance and improvement ranging from surveying and light vegetation clearance to building stiles, gates and surface improvements.
- 2007/08 saw another increase in our Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI 178) for rights of way being 'open, available and signed'. It has increased from 63% in 2005/06, to 67.5% in 2007/08. (This BVPI is established through 4 independent surveys that are carried out across South Somerset each calendar year. Each survey visits a random range of sites and checks their condition and accessibility. The BVPI is an average figure of the four surveys)
- A consultation with parishes asking for information regarding vegetation clearance and path prioritisation requested by SCC was carried out during 2007 and provided a good response. Parishes have listed paths which they feel should be on our vegetation clearance schedule; these paths have been checked by SSSDC officers who have decided whether to add them to the schedule or not. Our cutting for the 2008 season is half way through the third cut and the final cut for paths will be carried out during late September.
- Parishes were also asked to prioritise their paths according to usage with a ranking of 1-3 with 1 being the most used paths. We will be working with SCC to go through the responses in due course. A workshop was held on 27th October 2007 at which SCC Rights of Way team presented information about this piece of work to parishes and members.
- Further details of the Parish Footpath Stewardship Scheme are available from ranger Peter Keenlyside on 01963 435024.
- The Access Team have continued to work closely with Somerset County Council to bring in additional funding and to work collaboratively on trails, bridgework and community projects. Total funding secured from SCC exceeded £150k in 2007/08. Additional grants of some £20k were secured through SCC from the Local Transport

Plan for rights of way improvements in the South Somerset District. This additional money was used to improve signage across the area as recommended in the full network survey carried out by Somerset County Council.

At our Countryside Sites

A successful Chard Countryside Day was held in September 2007. An estimated 300 visitors attended. They were mainly from the local area but many said that they had not visited the Chard Reservoir Site before. The event was held in partnership with the Action for Chard Town community regeneration group. As a result of the initial success, the 2008 event was scheduled for Saturday, 13th September.

A Conservation Volunteer Team has been established at Chard Reservoir and it meets every Friday to carry out tasks with ranger Tim Brown. The team averages around five volunteers each week and they have undertaken tasks like reed bed management, path maintenance on the reserve, hide repairs and general maintenance duties. Anyone interested in helping this group and learning some new skills should contact Tim on his mobile number 07971 111955 for further details.

Since the closure of Chaffcombe Depot, the new ranger base operates from within the Fishermen's car park.

A routine maintenance programme is currently taking place on the dam wall at Chard Reservoir with a tree management programme for this end of the reservoir planned for the winter months

Our invasive species control programme continues on all SSDC countryside sites.

The Heritage Service

- The Community Heritage Access Centre (CHAC) is located at the Lufton Depot. It was fully re-launched in 2007 marking the completion of the physical move of SSDC's collections into the CHAC facility. At CHAC the collections receive care to museum standards and many of the objects are properly accessible for the first time.
- CHAC receives regular visits by members of the public wishing to view the collections or carry out research on items as diverse as guns, clocks and our regionally significant gloving collection. Invitations to behind-the-scenes tours were sent out to local groups and CHAC has received 1300 visitors in the past twelve months. This has included a number of evening tours, which is a new development enabled by the kind support of the Lufton depot team. Enquiries about these pre-booked group tours can be made to Claire Robinson on 01935 462855.
- CHAC has also been used as a venue for training workshops. In 2008 volunteers attended courses on Digital Photography for Museum Collections and a highly specialist course on Gun Conservation. Training courses are available to volunteers who work in our community museums and are arranged by the Museum Development Officer. This is a new partnership post funded by SSDC, Somerset County Museums Service (SSC) and the MLA SW (the regional agency for museums, libraries & archives). Further workshops are planned in the coming months. For further details please contact Natalie Watson, Somerset Museums Development Officer tel: 01935 462855 (office based every Friday).
- All this activity has swollen the ranks of the heritage volunteers and our numbers have risen rapidly in the last twelve months. These volunteers are working on a range of projects, from sorting out archival documents to cataloguing coins and tokens.

- CHAC also provides a base for working with the district's community museums and other community heritage groups. Support for museums has included help for Crewkerne on applications for Accreditation - the national standards scheme for all museums. Crewkerne has also benefited from exhibition installation and Chard Museum was assisted in developing schools loans boxes courtesy of the MLA SW.
- Crewkerne Museum is currently in negotiation with Coldharbour Mill in Devon to move two of Crewkerne's weaving looms for restoration.
- Chard Museum have kindly loaned material on the Gillingham family to the Museum of South Somerset.
- Thanks must also be extended to Numatic in Chard and the Ariel Motor Company in Crewkerne for their assistance in providing exhibits for 'The Generator'- a new exhibition on Innovation being staged at the Museum of South Somerset this summer.

The Tourism Service

2007/08 saw increased collaboration between the local authorities of Somerset through the Somerset Tourism Partnership. Projects undertaken included the establishment of the Visit Somerset website www.visitsomerset.co.uk This site provides a 'one-stop shop' for information on Somerset as a destination and the Somerset tourism trade.

The Somerset Tourism Partnership also launched the Visit Somerset county-wide tourism brochure, giving a far wider distribution of information than has previously been achieved.

The aim of the Partnership is to provide a stronger identity for the component areas of Somerset and to use combined resources to better effect and achieve economies of scale.

It was a year of note for both Yeovil TIC and Cartgate TIC. Both won silver medals in the South West Tourism Excellence Awards. This was achieved against stiff competition from other high-profile Tourist Information Centres in the South West.

The 2007 South Somerset Food Festival was bigger and better than ever with its launch at Montacute and over thirty local events held, many of which were in Area West. The 2008 event will be held from 27th September to October 2008.

The tourism team continues to produce a number of high quality local brochures including Discover South Somerset, Classic Gardens, Guide for visitors with disabilities, the Eighty mile Cycle Route, Market Towns in South Somerset and Explore the South Somerset Countryside.

The team offers an advice service to small business operating in the South Somerset tourism industry, offering a wealth of business advice and access to specialised training courses.

Financial Implications

The work highlighted in this report is met from within the existing service revenue budget. Additional income and grants were received from:

- Countryside Stewardship grants from DEFRA

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- Agency agreement funding from SCC
- Income from events and festivals such as walking festivals, Country Park Fayres and guided walks
- Income from educational activities such as slide shows, outreach work and staff led sessions.
- External grants e.g. The Heritage Lottery Fund, the Big Lottery Fund, Peoples Millions, Breathing Spaces, Aggregates Levy Fund.
- Partnership working with SCC and Parish Councils
- Co-operation, assistance and goodwill from farmers and landowners
- Developing external funding bids
- Area-specific assistance e.g. Action for Chard Town and the Chard Country Festival.
- Resource from the Somerset Tourism Partnership
- Special thanks must be given to our numerous volunteers who give their time and skills freely to this service

Implications for Corporate Priorities

The work of the Countryside Service supports the Districts Council's corporate priorities:

- Provide cost effective and well managed services
- Improve the health and well being of our citizens
- Increase economic vitality and prosperity
- Promoting a balanced natural and built environment

Background Papers: *Countryside Service Plan 2007/08*
Countryside Service Plan 2008/09